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TOP STORY

Dickson County Person of the Year 2021: District Attorney Ray Crouch

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District Attorney Ray Crouch talks to the jury during closing arguments of the Joseph Daniels trial last June. Daniels was convicted of murdering his 5-year-old son Joe Clyde.

LARRY MCCORMACK

District Attorney Ray Crouch spent almost all of May locked in a conference room of his Charlotte office preparing for the murder trial of Joseph Daniels.

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The conference room is lined with file cabinets. A white board charts the status of witnesses. Crouch watched hundreds of hours of video footage in the room to prepare for the Daniels case, joking that he “burnt out” a TV.

“To me, the number one thing about presenting your trial is knowing the facts better than anybody else,” he said.

Crouch said he prepped longer for this case than for any other case he’s ever had.

“You have to anticipate what the defense may do because we didn’t have a body,” he said.

In the end, his prep work paid off with murder convictions for Joseph Daniels and Steve Wiggins this summer in two of the highest-profile trials in county history. Those convictions have led Crouch to be named the 2021 Dickson County Citizen of the Year by the Dickson Post.

Daniels was convicted of second-degree murder for killing his son Joe Clyde Daniels. Wiggins was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to death for killing Dickson County Sheriff’s Office Sgt. Daniel Baker.

The two trials

Crouch wanted to be a business lawyer but became interested in trial law in law school. He was hired by Dan Alsobrooks in 2002 as an assistant district attorney for the 23rd District, where he’s worked ever since.

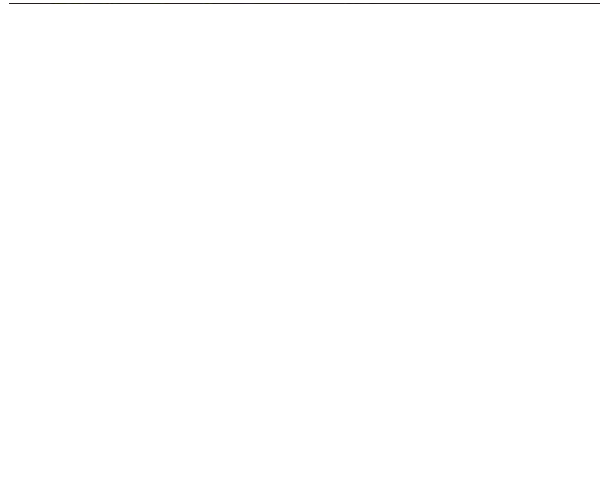
The district covers Cheatham, Dickson, Houston, Humphreys and Stewart counties. Crouch, an Ashland City resident, was elected DA in 2007 and is running for re-election in 2022.

Although the two murders occurred within a few weeks of each other in 2018, Crouch said he didn’t expect the trials to be that close together.

But with COVID-19 shutting down jury trials, he’s had a glut of homicide trials including four last summer. Starting in January, he’ll have two a month for the first four months of the year.

"There has not been an uptick in first-degree murders. It's that these cases all got consolidated and crunched in time, mainly because of COVID," he said.

One of the more memorable moments of the Daniels trial came during the final arguments. Crouch pulled an apple out of his bag and told the jury he would never be able to see an apple again without thinking of Joe Clyde.



Earlier in the trial, a witness had testified that Joe Clyde loved apples.

Crouch said that it's not possible to plan what to say in this type of rebuttal argument because he didn't know what the defense would say. That morning, he had bought an apple at a gas station as a snack, not knowing that he would use it that afternoon in his final argument.

Crouch said it dawned on him that morning just how intense the trial had been. He said that sometimes he forgets that the defendants and their family are real people suffering through tragedy.

"I thought the apple served as a reminder that Baby Joe was a human being, a child, a real person, and although the jury can't see his deceased body or his grave, maybe the apple will remind them of that," he said.

Crouch said he thought it was the testimony of Baby Joe's stepbrother Alex that convinced the jury. Joseph himself had said that Alex saw everything and that he wouldn't lie.

In the Wiggins case, the evidence of the murder was on video. However, Crouch thought it was what Wiggins did after the murder that pushed the jury to sentence Wiggins to death.

The case was Crouch's first capital case and the first capital case tried in the district since the 1990s.

Crouch watched the body camera footage of the murder hundreds of times.

"You don't think it weighs on you, but it does," he said.

Although he tries to leave his cases at the office, he talked with his wife about the Wiggins and Daniels cases because he needed an outlet.

Earlier this year, Crouch, the city of Dickson, the head of the TBI and others were sued for \$1 million in a harassment case.

Joshua Garton was charged with harassment for creating a meme of two men urinating on a grave with an image of Sgt. Daniel Baker. Garton's attorney allege that Crouch and others infringed upon his First Amendment rights.

Crouch said he wouldn't change anything he did in the case.

"I would do the same thing," he said, pointing out that Judge Craig Monsue said the social media post was not protected by the First Amendment.

It was Crouch's position that Garton had an intent to harass. Monsue dismissed the case as he found there was no "threat of harm."

Keeping the victims in mind

Crouch said that the hardest legal part of his job is explaining the law and facts of a case to the jury. But the hardest emotional part is consoling and working with victims of crime, he said.

"They're not as much concerned about the black letter of the law as they are about seeing justice and efficiency and getting their case to court," he said.

Every year, Crouch attends the Season to Remember event in Nashville that marks homicide victims from around the state. This year, Lisa Baker, wife of Sgt. Daniel Baker, was one of the main speakers at the event.

Crouch said he attends because "so often we hear very little about the actual victims."

After the event, Lisa Baker told a reporter, "It is a comfort to know that we wanted to push it to the full extent of the law and that's what we were able to do. That part is comforting. It gives you some sense of peace."

While Crouch said he tuned out the media coverage during the trials last summer, he had received community feedback. Some people left food from Boardable 615 at his office. Others have approached him in the Charlotte grocery store.

"I love getting feedback because a lot of times, people that are not familiar with the justice system or a case really will make observations that make me rethink how to look at the case," he said.

Crouch said that his district is unique because there are so many courts and law enforcement agencies he has to work with across the five counties.

Dickson County Sheriff Tim Eads said that sitting through these major cases Crouch has prosecuted has given him an appreciation for the DA's skills and leadership.

"He is involved in the communities he serves, and I believe he has a true heart to serve," Eads said.

Jeff Bledsoe, who was the Dickson County sheriff when Joe Clyde Daniels and Sgt. Baker were murdered, said that knowing Crouch and his office were engaged and focused on the cases allowed him to focus on his own responsibilities during the investigation.

“Under such difficult circumstances, it was a pleasure knowing General Crouch was completely immersed with all of our partnering agencies. He and his staff coordinated and attended meetings to review and determine the scope of the work done and remaining to be completed,” Bledsoe said.

Crouch credited his team of 12 ADAs and his wife for allowing him to be a successful prosecutor.

“My job is not to go out and win cases or get convictions, but it’s to find truth,” he said.